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STRATEGIC DISSONANCE
RPA TACTICS TO DEFEAT AL QAEDA

By

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Biography

Mr. Emory Brownlee is a student at the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He is a retired Army officer who received his commission through the University of Georgia ROTC program in 1985. During his 21 years in the Army, he served as an Army aviator in Europe, Asia, South America, and numerous CONUS locations. He is well versed in Army aviation tactical operations, military and civilian human resources management, and finance and budgeting. While serving in the Army, he obtained his Master of Arts Degree in Computer Resources and Information Management from Webster University and attended the Army's Command and General Staff College. Since his retirement from the military in 2007, he has served as the Regional Resources Manager for the Eastern Region of the Defense Contract Audit Agency in Smyrna, Georgia.



Abstract

The United States use of remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) as the primary means to defeat al-Qaeda is failing. The tactic is a convenient weapon of choice because it is accurate, low risk, and cost effective. Unfortunately, RPA strikes have only achieved limited success in temporarily degrading and disrupting al-Qaeda. The tactical successes, of this precision strike capability, have produced negative secondary effects that have strategic implications. RPA strikes exasperate the U.S.'s ability to defeat al-Qaeda because the undesirable consequences of the tactic serve to strengthen the very enemy the U.S. had hoped to destroy. Instead of defeating al-Qaeda, the tactic has strengthened its operational flexibility and its base of support.

RPA precision strikes have forced al-Qaeda to export their operations to other ungoverned areas throughout the Middle East and Africa to avoid detection. The attacks have created friction in U.S.-Pakistani relations and have hindered our efforts to expand Pakistani governance into their Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Inaccurate claims of high civilian casualties have created a media uproar that has put the U.S. in a public relations battle that it is currently losing, badly. Al-Qaeda's ability to discredit the U.S. has allowed it to garner sympathy and support from latent actors throughout the region. The same propaganda has made it impossible for the U.S. to supplant al-Qaeda ideology with a more humanitarian-centric ideology or to have any meaningful impact on suppressing al-Qaeda enablers.

The U.S. must repair its relations with Pakistan and get troops in FATA, become more transparent in its RPA operations, and win the public relations fight to build credibility in the region. Only then can it hope to isolate al-Qaeda from its support base and enablers and then supplant al-Qaeda's evil ideology with one that respects the value of life.

Introduction

When al-Qaeda and the Taliban found refuge in Pakistan's remote Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), the U.S. resorted to the use of remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) to engage high value targets (HVT) using precision munitions preemptively¹. The tactical use of RPAs as a kinetic weapon delivery platform was a new and effective weapon that the U.S. claimed was very discriminate. Other sources claimed they were not. As the RPA strikes increased significantly from 2004 to 2010, so did the accusations the U.S. was violating Pakistani sovereignty, international laws of armed conflict, and international humanitarian law. The U.S. refuted the accusations and attempted to appease the critics by increasing operational controls over the approval processes used in executing an RPA strike mission. The U.S. efforts failed to sway world opinion, which remains largely against the U.S.'s use of RPAs to target terrorists.

Negative international public opinion towards the U.S. benefited al-Qaeda by enabling it to capitalize on growing anti-American sentiment. The dilemma is that RPA strikes are a highly effective tactical means to kill specific al-Qaeda targets, but the strikes provide al-Qaeda an opportunity to espouse their ideology by using the controversy to gain an audience they would not have had otherwise. Does the short-term tactical benefit of RPA strikes support U.S. long-term strategic objectives, or does the tactic hinder U.S. efforts by indirectly strengthening al-Qaeda? This paper asserts the tactical use of RPA strikes exasperates the U.S.'s ability to defeat al-Qaeda because the undesirable consequences of the tactic serve to strengthen the very enemy the U.S. had hoped to destroy.

After providing some background to frame the narrative and introduce the reader to the salient strategic objective in the 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism (CT Strategy), the

paper will examine five components of the strategic objective and assesses whether the RPA strike tactic helps achieve the task or hinders its accomplishment. The paper will then provide recommendations on how the U.S. could modify its strategy to subordinate the tactical use of the RPAs in favor of ground forces and other elements of national power to achieve its strategic objective.



Thesis

This paper asserts the tactical use of RPA strikes exasperates the U.S.'s ability to defeat al-Qaeda because the undesirable consequences of the tactic serve to strengthen the very enemy the U.S. had hoped to destroy.



Background

Following al-Qaeda's attacks against the United States (U.S.) on September 11, 2001, a U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan pushed al-Qaeda out of Afghanistan into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. From FATA, the extremists continued to plan and conduct terror missions against the West. Due to Pakistani sovereignty issues, the U.S. military was powerless to pursue them. Then, in 2004, the U.S. initiated a secretive CIA's targeted-killing program,² which employed armed RPAs³. The U.S. relied exclusively on RPAs to eliminate HVTs in the region⁴. The RPA strikes averaged about 30 per year, but gradually escalated to a peak in late 2010⁵ when al-Qaeda and the Taliban increased their attacks against the West. In total, from June 2004 through April 2015, the U.S. has carried out more than 400 RPA strikes in Pakistan.⁶ The RPA strikes continue today at a rate of less than 30 strikes per year.⁷

In the months leading up to the publishing of the CT Strategy in June 2011, the Taliban had stepped up its insurgency operations in Afghanistan and al-Qaeda was operating with a certain degree of impunity from the FATA region of Pakistan.⁸ The U.S. responded in late 2010 and early 2011, with a troop buildup in Afghanistan to counter the Taliban insurgency and significantly increased RPA strikes in the FATA region of Pakistan to decapitate al-Qaeda leadership. The U.S. CT Strategy, which was published immediately following the height of this surge, reflects the U.S. attitude at that time and stresses a more direct and aggressive approach to neutralizing the threat. One of the strategy's three overarching goals was to disrupt, degrade, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents. The strategy expressed a sense of urgency when it warned that success hinges on a rapid degradation of al-Qaeda's leadership structure, command and control, organizational capabilities, support networks, and infrastructure at a pace faster than the group is able to recover.⁹

The primary operational focus of the strategy was on eliminating al-Qaeda's safe haven in Pakistan, degrading the Taliban, and building up Afghan Security Forces to ensure they would not be able to find refuge in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrew.¹⁰ Beyond this immediate concern, the strategy articulated less immediate operational focus areas to achieve long-term success, e.g.: increase Pakistan's capabilities to govern the FATA region; degrade links between al-Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents; counter al-Qaeda ideology with American ideology;¹¹ and deprive al-Qaeda of its means to sustain operations.¹² By any measure, the RPA attacks achieved the U.S. strategy's immediate, short-term, primary objective of disrupting and degrading the operational capabilities of these extremists, but the effects were temporary and the repercussions of the tactic affected the U.S.'s ability to achieve the subsequent, long-term objectives.

RPA strikes precipitated a change in how al-Qaeda and its associated groups operated. They adapted by modifying their organizational structure and decentralizing operations to other ungoverned safe havens in countries like Yemen and Somalia. Al-Qaeda and Taliban seized the opportunity to leverage the news media to incite a public backlash in opposition to RPA strike tactics, which the media portrayed as indiscriminately causing civilian casualties. Al-Qaeda also exploited the media, and independent investigative journalists, to propagate stories of tragedy as a propaganda tool to cast doubt on the legality and morality of this U.S. tactic. The questionable legality created rifts between the U.S. and our allies, hindering our ability to build enduring partnerships and strengthen nation-state governance. The pronounced public criticism served to strengthened al-Qaeda's moral position and ideology, while simultaneously casting a shadow over the values and ideology the U.S. hoped to champion. Instead of depriving al-Qaeda of their operational means, the RPA strike tactic had the unintended consequence of enamoring potential

donors to their cause. Holistically, the tactic exacerbated the U.S. ability to achieve its long-term objectives. It is, therefore, important to critically analyze the secondary effects of this tactic and assess the overall implications the tactic has on achieving the U.S. strategic objective in order to remedy any strategic dissonance.

Strategic Dissonance

The salient overarching goal of the U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy, relevant to this analysis, is to disrupt, degrade, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda. The wording of this goal indicates a systematic and progressive nature in gaining the desired end state of “defeat,” without specifying the ways and means to achieve each step. However, the strategy document does lay out the five components to this strategic objective, which this paper introduced in the previous section. U.S. actions reveal the RPA strike tactic is the primary military means by which it intends to destroy al-Qaeda in Pakistan. This tactic has had an impact on each of the five operational components of this strategic aim to some degree. The following analysis will consider each to determine whether the tactic is advancing U.S. strategy or exacerbating it.

Eliminate Safe Havens

The first component task is to eliminate safe havens by coordinating with foreign partners to contest and diminish al-Qaeda’s operating space using mutually reinforcing efforts.¹³ This task recognizes how important it is to have Pakistani support to defeat al-Qaeda. Ideally, mutually reinforcing efforts would entail using U.S. intelligence and RPA strike capability with Pakistani ground forces to clear and occupy targeted areas, systematically diminishing al-Qaeda’s operating space. Unfortunately, Pakistan was not a willing partner, and refused to turn its energy away

from its primary threat, India.¹⁴ As the U.S. waited for Pakistan to become a more willing partner, the U.S. continued its RPA strikes on HVTs in FATA.

Initial U.S. intelligence estimates indicated the RPA Strike tactic was very successful at eliminating the targets. From mid-2008 to mid-2010, the U.S. conducted over 80 RPA target strikes that resulted in over 500 militants killed. The U.S. assessed that noncombatant casualties were relatively low at about 5 percent, or approximately 30 non-combatants who were typically family members that were living or traveling with the intended targets.¹⁵ If the assessment was accurate, it would support the administration's assertion that "drone strikes are surgically calibrated to remove the cancer of al-Qaeda without affecting the surrounding tissue of civilians in the area."¹⁶ President Obama, in his 2013 address to the National Defense University, emphasized how effective the tactic was by citing intelligence gathered at Bin Laden's compound as proof.¹⁷ The signature strikes also significantly hindered al-Qaeda's ability to thoroughly vet and train their new recruits.¹⁸ Unfortunately, the successes of the RPA strikes were fleeting. The U.S.'s inability to follow up with ground forces allowed a remnant to remain intact, which complicated efforts to eliminate the safe havens.

Bin Laden adapted to the U.S. attacks and dispersed the al-Qaeda leadership to retain continuity.¹⁹ Al-Qaeda relocated to more densely populated areas of the country. In effect, the RPA strikes helped spread militancy and instability across Pakistan.²⁰ Al-Qaeda also transformed itself from a vulnerable hierarchical organization into a resilient decentralized movement.²¹ Instead of limiting al-Qaeda's operating space, the tactic made al-Qaeda more elusive. The U.S. Central Command expressed concern in their 2015 Posture Statement that al-Qaeda was more dangerous now, because they were operating in more areas with increased collaboration as a transnational syndicate.²² President Obama's recent decision to keep U.S. forces in Afghanistan

to counter the Taliban resurgence further validates the USCENTCOM assessment of the current situation and shows that the RPA strikes alone, can only achieve temporary success.

The U.S.'s inability to coordinate its actions in FATA with the Pakistan government prevented mutually supporting efforts against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Pakistani political leaders viewed RPA strikes as a domestic hot potato, so colluded with the U.S. privately to allow for the strikes, while denouncing our actions publically.²³ This tacit approval enabled the U.S. to continue its targeted killing campaign, but made the operation a one dimensional and unilateral effort without lasting effects. In light of USCENTCOM's assessment and the recent surge in Taliban insurgency operations originating from Pakistan and East Afghanistan, the U.S. only achieved short-lived success in disrupting and degrading these non-state actors through its use of RPA strikes. Additionally, this tactic was detrimental to U.S. efforts to achieve the second component of this overarching goal of building enduring partnerships and capabilities.

Improve and Expand Governance

Specifically, the second task to defeat al-Qaeda is to assist partners to improve and expand governance and strengthen the rule of law, so that partner nations can bring suspected terrorists to justice within a respected and transparent legal system.²⁴ The U.S. vision for how this was to occur is articulated in the U.S. National Military Strategy, which states that the U.S. will contribute select combat forces, enabling technologies, and training in support of credible local partners that provide the majority of forces necessary to restore and secure their homelands.²⁵ To execute the intent of this vision, the U.S. provided Pakistan approximately \$10 billion to train and equip forces in counterinsurgency and counterterrorist operations. Pakistan took the money, but refused the training assistance, because it did not want to appear too closely aligned to the very nation they had been denouncing for using RPA in targeted strikes in FATA.²⁶ Maintaining

separation from the U.S. allowed Pakistan to demonstrate to their domestic audience that they were self-sufficient and not reliant on others for their national security, but still benefit from the U.S. RPA strikes.²⁷ Apparently, the Pakistani President had fallen into a trap from the allure of the gratification it received from the targeted strikes without having to commit its own forces, a la Eliot Cohen.²⁸ It did not take long for the Pakistani leadership's ruse to evaporate.

The Pakistani government faced repercussions at home, from its public²⁹ and military, for its complicity in the clandestine approach to targeting HVTs in FATA. Specifically, former President Musharraf faced serious opposition from the Pashtun generals in the army for his alignment with America and his heavy-handed approach in dealing with militancy in the country's tribal areas.³⁰ It was the Pakistani military's belief that the U.S. approach was inadvertently helping Al Qaeda and the Taliban strengthen their position and their standing in the area, making it more difficult for the military to deal effectively with militancy in FATA.³¹ The disjointed effort played a large role in Pakistan's inability to extend their governance into FATA despite the deployment of 150,000 troops into the area between 2004 and late 2013.³² Only recently, within the last two years, has Pakistan's military been able to step up its efforts to wrestle control of FATA from the extremist.

By maintaining a continuous presence in the region with a sizable force, the Pakistan army is gaining control systematically and methodically, and earning favorable tribal public opinion in the process.³³ Had the U.S. and Pakistan been more transparent about the approval process of the RPA strikes initially, the Pakistani government would not have had to shield itself from public outcry over our partnership. The Pakistan army could have benefited from U.S. training and fielded a well-trained force in FATA much earlier.³⁴ The secrecy surrounding the Pakistani and U.S. partnership also had the unintended consequence of extending al-Qaeda and Taliban

governance of FATA, which further entrenched the extremists in the area and hindered the U.S. from achieving its third component of this strategic object, to make al-Qaeda less cohesive.

Isolate from Support Base

The third task in achieving the strategic objective was to degrade the capabilities of the non-state actors in FATA by driving fissures between these groups and their bases of support in an attempt to isolate them from those that could augment their capabilities and further their agenda. The U.S. knows that al-Qaeda exploits local grievances to bolster recruitment, expand its operational reach, destabilize local governments, and reinforce safe havens from which it operates.³⁵ In order to defeat al-Qaeda, the U.S. must exploit the gaps in al-Qaeda's organizational cohesion as effectively as al-Qaeda exploits the gaps in our partnerships. The continued use of RPA strikes makes this difficult to accomplish, because the U.S. remains on the defensive in trying to legitimize its RPA strike program internationally.

There persists an international public perception that the tactic of using RPAs in targeted strikes is ineffective and that the U.S. is hiding the truth about the extent of the actual collateral damage. U.S. collusion with Pakistan in gaining tacit approval produced an aura of secrecy and illegitimacy surrounding U.S. actions that provided fuel for the jihad fire.³⁶ Instead of driving fissures between extremist groups, RPA strikes have coalesced independent militant groups that form a stronger affiliation with organizations like al-Qaeda. General McChrystal believes that targeted strikes are increasing the number of radicals and extremists when he said, "each one you killed has a brother, father, son and friends, who do not necessarily think that they were killed because they were doing something wrong".³⁷ According to Pakistan's Prime Minister Gilan, a well thought out strategy separates the tribesmen from militants, but targeted strikes unite the militants and the tribal people against the government, which cannot win the war without the

support of the people.³⁸ Based on these two opinions, it would seem the U.S. RPA target strikes are strengthening the base and the recruiting pool, from which al-Qaeda and the Taliban draw upon.³⁹

The promising initial effects of RPA strikes against the core of al-Qaeda in Pakistan gave way to long-term effects that are considerably less favorable. The strikes did not isolate Al-Qaeda from its base, but forced the extremist group to adapt to its new environment. The U.S. now faces an organization, which has emerged as a more flexible and decentralized threat that is still capable of planning and executing terrorist attacks across the globe. Al Qaeda and affiliates continue to receive funding from state actors and individuals sympathetic to their cause, which has allowed them to expand and operate in other countries. It is clear that the U.S. RPA strikes have failed to drive fissures in al-Qaeda's base of support, but instead exacerbated our ability to isolate them from it and likely acted as an enabler to spread of their ideology.

Supplant Ideology

In order to defeat al-Qaeda the U.S. must work with global partners to supplant their ideology with one centered on universal rights. The U.S.'s aim is to diminish al-Qaeda's ability to exploit violence and create a world that openly rejects al-Qaeda as irrelevant. This task is especially difficult to achieve because the ideological principle is synonymous with a religious tenant. To cast a disparaging remark on any al-Qaeda ideological principle, would risk disparaging the religion of Islam, which would result in a pronounced backlash from all Muslims. At best, the U.S. can only advance a positive narrative that reflects international and world norms, which are not in contradiction with religious norms, e.g., legal and moral behavior, the rule of law, and tolerance. Unfortunately, this is a difficult message for the U.S. to espouse

and make resonate with the targeted audience when the court of world opinion is denouncing it for using RPA strikes in FATA, on grounds that the strikes are criminal and immoral actions.

There have been myriad articles, essays, and reports that accuse the U.S. of violating Pakistani state sovereignty, international human rights laws, the law of armed conflict, etc. This discourse is pervasive in the media across the world. Al-Qaeda spokespersons have astutely taken advantage of the media's inability to access the FATA region and have fed much of the data to the media that fans the flames of public denunciation. The U.S. has less effectively attempted to counter the accusations by justifying the RPA strikes meet two important criteria under international human rights law. First, it is necessary to protect the lives of the American people from terrorists who pose a continuing and imminent threat. Second, there are no other means available to neutralize the threat.⁴⁰ In a 2013 speech at the U.S. National Defense University, President Obama made the U.S. position clear: "Under domestic law, and international law, the United States is at war with al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their associated forces. We are at war with an organization that right now would kill as many Americans as they could if we did not stop them first. So this is a just war -- a war waged proportionally, in last resort, and in self-defense."⁴¹

The U.S.'s ability to justify the use of RPA strikes in a convincing manner is critical when it comes to winning over the hearts and minds of the world. The U.S.'s effort thus far has been ineffective. Even some Obama administration security officials expressed serious doubts about the wisdom of the RPA target strike program, given the ire it has ignited overseas.⁴² Military commanders have also recognized that the U.S. must win the public relations war and have taken actions to mitigate bad press.⁴³ In July 2012, the U.S. Army published a manual on civilian casualty mitigation that emphasizes how unavoidable, or lawful, civilian casualties would be

publicized and critically viewed by the American people, the local population, and the international community. It cautions that mission accomplishment and public support could be jeopardized if civilian casualties occurred.”⁴⁴

Despite the administration’s defense of U.S. RPA strike actions and the military’s emphasis on the disciplined use of deadly force, the U.S. image remains tarnished. Authors are still publishing articles today that condemn the U.S. for their RPA strikes in Pakistan. In an April 2015 New York Times article, Shane Scott wrote, “The proliferating mistakes have given drones a sinister reputation in Pakistan and Yemen and have provoked a powerful anti-American backlash in the Muslim world. Part of the collateral damage in the strikes has been Mr. Obama’s dream of restoring the United States’ reputation with Muslims around the globe.” This critical article unfortunately represents the message the media outlets are broadcasting around the world. Until the U.S. is able to control the narrative of the press by sharing information more openly, the U.S. will not be able to diminish public perception of al-Qaeda ideology, render their message irrelevant, or deprive al-Qaeda of their enabling means.

Deprivation of Enablers

Depriving al-Qaeda of their enabling means is the final component of this U.S. CT strategic objective to defeat al-Qaeda. Non-state actors such as al-Qaeda require financial support, communication capability to espouse their ideology and coordinate their operations, administrative support that enables travel of operatives and training for recruits, and the acquisition and movement of weapons. Mass media and the internet in particular have emerged as enablers for terrorist planning, facilitation, and communication.⁴⁵ In effect, enabling means are anything that assist al-Qaeda advance their cause. Unfortunately, the secondary effects of the RPA strikes have improved al-Qaeda’s support base and coalesced organizations under the

affiliation of their ideology. Al-Qaeda's decentralized command and control apparatus, dispersed throughout the Middle East and North Africa, have greatly expanded their area of operations and made it possible for enablers to operate more openly than if they were contained in the FATA region of Pakistan.

The one advantage the U.S. has in achieving this component of the strategic objective is that it can work with international partners to track down and stop financial inflows and equipment shipments to known al-Qaeda, affiliates, and adherents. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have made progress in disrupting terrorist financial support networks.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the influx in means going to these extremists is so large, that the net effect of our efforts is having little impact on their ability to operate. The Islamic State is an excellent example of an affiliated extremist organization that has ample means despite international efforts to disrupt its finances. David Cohen, the Undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, stated, "Imposing targeted sanctions on ISIS officials and financiers, to cut off external funding networks, is an important element of our strategy to undermine ISIS' financial foundation. But, we are mindful that ISIS, unlike many other terrorist groups, also relies on significant funding derived from sources internal to Syria and Iraq, including criminal conduct such as smuggling, extortion, and robbery. It also has received millions of dollars through the despicable practice of ransoming hostages it has taken," he asserted.⁴⁷

Al-Qaeda and their affiliates rely on varying means of support that span the spectrum from charitable support to trans-national criminal activity. Disrupting one aspect of the support network will only temporarily degrade al-Qaeda's ability to operate, until a new network is established. As long as al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or their affiliates and adherents appeal to a segment of the Islamic masses, there is little hope that the U.S. can have a significant effect on

the means by which al-Qaeda operates. In order for the U.S. to succeed in disrupting the means of al-Qaeda's support, it must first win the media battle and make al-Qaeda's ideology repugnant to its current support base.



Recommendations

The U.S. must carefully weigh the costs and risks of its actions against the costs and risks of inaction, recognizing that certain tactical successes can have unintended consequences that sometimes contribute to failure at the strategic level. The temporary effectiveness of RPA strikes in FATA undoubtedly saved countless American lives by disrupting al-Qaeda's operational capability, but the strikes have also created several secondary effects that have exacerbated our ability to defeat the organization. With a clearer understanding of why the U.S. failed to achieve its strategy, it is now possible to consider what actions would have resulted in a more positive outcome in this conflict.

The first task was to eliminate safe havens by working in coordination with foreign partners to contest and diminish al-Qaeda operating space using mutually reinforcing efforts. The U.S. failed to understand that by colluding with the Pakistani political leaders to gain tacit approval to conduct RPA strikes, they unintentionally alienated the Pakistani military and Pakistani civil-military discord ensued. Pakistani military's unwillingness to assist with reinforcing efforts made the operation a one-dimensional operation. To deny an enemy use of terrain, you must occupy that terrain. In this case, the Pakistani government prevented direct ground intervention. When it became evident that the Pakistani leadership was not willing to support the U.S. openly, the U.S. should have acted unilaterally to occupy FATA. The U.S. had nothing to lose. Its complicity in the scheme made it appear to others that the U.S. was taking unilateral action in FATA in violation of Pakistani sovereignty anyway. Other nations' perception that the U.S. is flagrantly violating international law has made the U.S. a rather undesirable partner in the region, which is hampering the U.S.'s ability to track down al-Qaeda in other areas. Also, without Pakistan's direct assistance, the U.S. lacked cultural awareness and the ability to communicate with tribal

leaders. Had the U.S. rejected the arrangement and acted independently, Pakistan could not have harmed the U.S. reputation any more than it did.

Through diplomacy, the U.S. could have coerced Pakistan to acknowledge the U.S. as a partner openly. Pakistan could have shown strength by announcing the U.S.-Pakistan coalition effort, under their own terms, to the media and would have gained the credit for the operation's success. It is unlikely that Pakistan would have refused to cooperate and risked a confrontation with the U.S., while simultaneously confronting India. Had the U.S. used such a firm stance with Pakistan, forces could have been on the ground to clear remnant forces and allow international organizations to report the results of RPA strikes accurately, effectively defanging al Qaeda's propaganda mill.⁴⁸ Al-Qaeda has been winning the propaganda campaign, which is allowing them to sustain their base of support. If the U.S. hopes to drive fissures between al-Qaeda and their bases of support, it must go on the propaganda offensive. The U.S. can do this by occupying FATA and embedding war correspondents with the occupying force to provide first hand reporting. Once the U.S. is able refute inaccurate claims, it can regain its legitimacy, which will enable it to garner public support and isolate al-Qaeda from its base of support.

Occupying the moral high ground is the key to supplanting al-Qaeda's ideology with a human-rights centric ideology. Al-Qaeda espouses its ideology to instill hatred and inspire latent actors to join their ranks. Exposing al-Qaeda's ideology as evil and anti-Islamic would render al-Qaeda irrelevant. To make gains in this area, the U.S. must provide RPA strike data more openly and expose the U.S.-Pakistan tacit approval arrangement so the world accurately perceives the arrangement and does not question U.S. motives. As long as the U.S. actions seem illegal and immoral, its credibility will remain tarnished and its effort to espouse a human rights-centric ideology is pointless.

In becoming more transparent, the U.S. must weigh the risk of revealing classified technology against the benefit of winning the hearts and minds of other nations that have the capacity to advance either the U.S. strategic goal or the al-Qaeda strategic goal. The U.S. must also assume risk and deploy combat forces in FATA, not only to deny al-Qaeda a safe haven, but also to work with local populations to bring peace, governance, and law to FATA. The only way to effectively control the narrative in FATA, is to communicate it in person.⁴⁹ Once the U.S. reestablishes its credibility and gains success in supplanting the al-Qaeda ideology in both developed and tribal areas, it will be able to diminish al-Qaeda's enabling means.

It is al-Qaeda's ideology that appeals to those who provide the means to the organization and sustain it with the people, equipment, money, and support it needs to carry out terrorist acts against non-Muslim states and apostates. While the U.S., working with its regional partners, are having some success in identifying sources of support, there is little that can be done to stop it. The sources are difficult to determine and harder to control when they flow through criminal networks or state actors that prop up the terrorist organizations.⁵⁰ Until those who support al-Qaeda's ideology deem it irrelevant, they will continue to resource the violent extremists.

Conclusion

Al-Qaeda adapted their operations and dispersed their command and control to a more decentralized structure. Al-Qaeda also leveraged the media to purport themselves as the victims, atop the moral high ground, which improved their ability to recruit those sympathetic to their ideology and cause. Media reports run stories of unacceptably high numbers of civilian casualties and deaths, due to RPA strikes that are not as discriminate as the U.S. wants everyone to believe. The high numbers of casualties reported in the media contradicted the U.S.'s claim of precision and low collateral damage. Whether the media's numbers are accurate is irrelevant. The reports increased public scrutiny of the RPA operations, cast doubt on U.S. credibility, and turned international public opinion against the U.S., while simultaneously strengthening al-Qaeda's base of support. The U.S.'s inability to manage the media discourse served to galvanize anti-American sentiment⁵¹, which has made the U.S. an unappealing partner to other nations, prevented the U.S. from supplanting al-Qaeda ideology, or depriving them of their enabling means.

Had the U.S. not colluded with Pakistan, by accepting tacit approval to employ RPA target strikes in FATA, and instead forced Pakistan to acknowledge their partnership with the U.S. openly, the tactic would have been more successful. An open partnership would have allowed the U.S. to assure there were ground forces in FATA to supplement the effects of the RPA strikes. Ground forces would have enabled accurate BDA and collateral damage assessments, denied al-Qaeda use of the region, and reduced the number of surviving remnant forces. The partner control of the area would have given media access to FATA and would have enabled the U.S. to control media discourse by providing accurate data and unfiltered access to societal impacts of both al-Qaeda and the effects of RPA strikes. The truth would have deprived al-Qaeda of the

support base, and given the U.S. the moral high ground to supplant their ideology with a human rights centric ideology. Al-Qaeda's appeal would have waned along with their enablers.



Notes

¹ White House, 2002 *National Security Strategy*, 6. "...we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists." Since September 11, 2001, the United States (U.S.) has been engaged in what former President George W. Bush termed "The War on Terror". On October 7, 2001, shortly after the terrorist attacks on the U.S., the U.S. responded by attacking al-Qaeda operating in Afghanistan to prevent them from conducting further attacks against Americans. The 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) laid out the basis for the U.S. option to conduct preemptive strikes to protect American lives and the interests of the U.S. from the threat of imminent danger.

² Laub, "The Taliban in Afghanistan."

³ Columbia, "Civilian Impact of Drones," 8-14. RPA tactical strikes employ the MQ-1 Predators that are armed with Hellfire missiles and MQ-9 Reapers that are armed with a combination of Hellfire missiles, GBU-12 Paveway II laser-guided bomb, or JDAM GPS-guided bomb. These aircraft have the ability to loiter over the target area for an extended period and are equipped with an impressive array of sensors that provide operators time and technology to acquire and identify targets with a high degree of accuracy. The U.S. uses two distinct RPA mission profiles. Deliberate attacks against known targets are referred to as "personality strikes" and dynamic attacks against targets of opportunity that exhibit behaviors associated with terrorist activities are referred to as "signature strikes." RPAs have proven to be the U.S. weapon of choice in counterterrorist and counter insurgency operations because they provide an effective means of killing HVTs in inaccessible areas at minimal risk to the U.S. Due to the RPA's relative low cost, compared to traditional troop deployments, this system is efficient. The high effectiveness and efficiency of these weapon systems provides the U.S. a long-term sustainable tactical means to assist in achieving its strategic objective as the U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy suggests.

⁴ Maass, "From U-2 to Drones," 218. Pakistan strongly rebuked the U.S. for violating their sovereignty when U.S. Special Forces conducted a raid in FATA to kill an al-Qaeda target, which left the U.S. with few options.

⁵ Aslam, "Critical Evaluation of America," 317.

⁶ Baker, "Amid Errors."

⁷ Ibid. Chart indicates CY 2013 and CY 2014 had slightly less than 30 drone strikes each.

⁸ Jordan, "Effectiveness of the Drone," 14, in Seth Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of Al Qaeda Since 9/11* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 223–32. It became clear Pakistan was not going to eject the Taliban insurgents, who attacked coalition forces across the border daily, or Al Qaeda, who continued to train foreign volunteers and plan terrorist attacks against Europe and the United States, from the FATA.

⁹ White House, *Strategy for Counterterrorism*, 13.

¹⁰ Ibid, 12. By stressing this point in this manner, it implies that the U.S. will execute the CT strategy in a sequential manner, not simultaneously. Also, the CT Strategy does not explicitly state the use of military action, or RPA strikes, but it is implied.

¹¹ Ibid, 17.

¹² Ibid, 14.

¹³ Ibid, 9.

¹⁴ Woodward, *Obama's War*, photo 28. Caption: Gen Ashfaq Kayani, Pakistan Army Chief of Staff, refused to take on all the extremist groups in his country. Kayani had other priorities. "I'll be the first to admit that I am India-centric," He said.

¹⁵ Entous, "Special Report," and Scott Shane, "C.I.A. to Expand Use of Drones in Pakistan," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2009.

¹⁶ Columbia, "Civilian Impact of Drones," 69, in John Brennan, "The Ethics and Efficacy of the President's Counterterrorism Strategy" (address, Wilson Center, Washington, DC, April 30, 2012).

¹⁷ Obama, address to NDU, One document stated, “We could lose the reserves to enemy’s air strikes. We cannot fight air strikes with explosives.” Other communications gathered from al-Qaeda operatives indicate that the targeted strikes have saved lives by killing the skilled al-Qaeda commanders, trainers, bomb makers and operatives that were plotting operations against the West.

¹⁸ Jordan, “Effectiveness of the Drone,” 16-18.

¹⁹ Ibid, 16-18.

²⁰ Aslam, “Critical Evaluation of America,” 325.

²¹ Zackie, “An Analysis of Abu Mus’ab,” 1, in P. Cruickshank and M. Ali, “Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 30 (2007):1–14.
<http://www.lawandsecurity.org/documents/AbuMusabalSuriArchitectoftheNewAlQaeda.pdf>.

²² Austin, Statement. The 2015 U.S. Central Command’s Posture statement reveals the long-term consequences of al-Qaeda’s dispersion. Al-Qaeda’s movement is becoming more diffuse and decentralized as compared to pre-9/11. The posture statement cautions that the risk of affiliates and allies operating in more areas, increasingly collaborating, and coordinating with one another as a transnational, loosely confederated, ‘syndicate’ is cause for concern. The statement goes on to say violent extremist organizations (VEO), to include the remnants of core al-Qaeda (AQ), continue to operate in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and, to a lesser extent, parts of eastern Afghanistan. These groups threaten regional stability, plan attacks against the U.S. and partner interests, and pursue weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Of note, the Taliban insurgency continues to present a credible threat to the Afghan government.

²³ Maan, “Pakistan’s Drone Dilemma,” 87, in Bob Woodward, *Obama’s War: The Inside Story* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 26, and S. Iftikhar Murshed, “Drones and Deception,” *The News*, June 9, 2013.

²⁴ White House, *Strategy for Counterterrorism*, 9-10.

²⁵ Department of Defense, *National Military Strategy*, 12.

²⁶ Nawaz, “The Pakistan Army.”

²⁷ Maan, “Pakistan’s Drone Dilemma,” 87. Pakistani political leadership seemed content with the current arrangement and was in no hurry to commit its own forces to the struggle. The Pakistani position became very clear when President Asif Ali Zardari and CIA Director Michael Hayden on November 12, 2010. While discussing predator strikes, President Zardari told Hayden to “Kill the seniors, collateral damage worries you Americans. It does not worry me.”

²⁸ Byman, “Kosovo and the Great,” 38, in Eliot A. Cohen, “The Mystique of U.S. Air Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 1 (January/February 1994), p. 109. In Eliot Cohen’s words, “Air power is an unusually seductive form of military strength, in part because, like modern courtship, it appears to offer gratification without commitment.”

²⁹ Columbia, “Civilian Impact of Drones,” 22.

³⁰ Aslam, “Critical Evaluation of America,” 325.

³¹ Ibid, 324.

³² Maan, “Pakistan’s Drone Dilemma,” 88, in Richard Wike, *Few Americans Trust Pakistan*, Pew Research Center, October 23, 2013. (accessed 24 October 2015) <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/10/23/few-americans-trust-pakistan/> Only 11% of Pakistanis have a favorable opinion of the U.S. according the latest Pew research.

³³ Comment obtained through an interview with LTC Ali, Pakistani exchange student, attending Air War College.

³⁴ The training would have likely strengthened the partnership between the two armies and led to improved operational coordination. U.S. complicity in the scheme to accept tacit approval for RPA strikes privately, and then allow Pakistan to denounce our action publically, served our immediate purpose, but had unintended consequences such as public condemnation of the government and a rift within the Pakistani military that delayed Pakistan in expanding their area of governance into FATA by years.

³⁵ White House, *Strategy for Counterterrorism*, 9. The strategy goes on to say, the operational dismantlement of Pakistan-based al-Qaeda will not eliminate the threat to the United States, as we are likely to face a lingering threat from operatives already trained as well as from the group's affiliates and adherents in South Asia and in other parts of the world.

³⁶ Pantucci, "Deep Impact," 72.

³⁷ Ibid, 74, and Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, Commander of US and ISAF forces in Afghanistan (Address, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Washington, D.C., 1 October 2009. <http://www.iiss.org/EasySiteWeb/GatewayLink.aspx?allid=31537>. During McChrystal's speech, he highlights his sense of the variance in 'COIN mathematics' stating that for every two in ten insurgents you kill, you might end up facing anything between two to twenty the next day.

³⁸ Aslam, "Critical Evaluation of America," 324.

³⁹ Ibid, 325, in B. Fishman, "The battle for Pakistan: militancy and conflict across the FATA and NWFP," *Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper*. The New America Foundation. April 2010. (Accessed 20 August 2011), <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/fishman.pdf>. One case in point occurred in 2009, when three militant groups, led by Mullah Nazir, Baitullah Mehsud and Hafiz Gul Bahadur, formed an alliance to fight against the Pakistani army in large part because of targeted strikes in South Waziristan.

⁴⁰ Crosston, "Pandora's Presumption," 5.

⁴¹ Obama, address to NDU.

⁴² Shane, "Drone Strikes Reveal."

⁴³ Columbia, "Civilian Impact of Drones," 55, in General Petraeus, Commander U.S. Central Command, Tactical Directive on Disciplined Use of Force to the International Security Assistance Force, August 4, 2010, accessed 16 September 2012, <http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/isaf-releases/general-petraeusissues-updated-tactical-directive-emphasizes-disciplined-use-of-force.html>. General David Petraeus issued a series of tactical directives in 2010 and 2012 that emphasized the disciplined use of force and a warning that every Afghan civilian death diminishes our cause.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 55, in Army Tactics Techniques and Procedures Manual (ATTP) 3-37.31, *Civilian Casualty Mitigation*, Department of the Army, July 2012, 1-5.

⁴⁵ White House, *Strategy for Counterterrorism*, 10.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 14.

⁴⁷ Hickey, "ISIS' Sources of Revenue."

⁴⁸ Farhat, "Year of the Drone Misinformation," 529-535. There are only a few articles posted that contradict the high collateral casualty rates. In this article, the author states that militants collect the bodies, bury the dead, and then issue a statement that the dead were innocent civilians. The author stresses that this is part of their propaganda campaign. They provide messages to pro-Taliban and al-Qaeda media persons, and political forces in Pakistan, to generate public sympathy for the terrorists. If the author's assertion is accurate, this explains the significant disparity in U.S. estimates and media estimates.

⁴⁹ Fair, "Pakistani Political Communications," 14. If the U.S wishes to influence Pakistani opinion than the U.S. must be on the ground, with the tribes since about 80% of information the tribe receives is by word of mouth.

⁵⁰ Hickey, "ISIS' Sources of Revenue."

⁵¹ Fair, "Pakistani Political Communications," 3.

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